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by

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2011

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**Tracing with Words:
Italo Calvino & the Art of Saul Steinberg**

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**Tracing with Words:
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by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2011

Acknowledgements

Though it is my name appears on the cover of this report, a great number of people have contributed to its completion. I shall be ever thankful to Professor Daniela Bini. It was an immense honor to be one of her students in the inaugural class of the UT Austin Italian Studies Graduate Program. The experience truly enriched my life.

I am very grateful to the outstanding guidance, practical advice, and encouragement of my graduate advisor and long-time professor Guy Raffa. I am also thankful to Professor Douglas Biow for reading my report and enriching my ideas.

A special thank you to Sheila Schwartz, Executive Director of the Saul Steinberg Foundation, for providing me with a wealth of wonderful materials including published and unpublished images and letters.

I must extend a thank you my dear classmates who served as a constant source of feedback, and especially to Melissa Demos for being my natural mentor, art-literature companion, and proofreader extraordinaire. Her stimulating insights and impressive creativity helped me think more expansively about this topic.

Many friends have helped me stay sane through the two-year program. Their support and care helped me with day-to-day health and happiness. I greatly value their friendship and I deeply appreciate their belief in me. I also thank my family for their love and support.

My deepest gratitude is to my wonderful husband Renato Zanetti who provided me with the greatest support, encouragement, and example. Grazie, Renato.

Abstract

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Guy Raffa

This report proposes that the architectural structure of Italo Calvino's novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* evolved from the writer's personal experience engaging with the figurative arts through ekphrastic writing, namely the essays he composed for the art of Saul Steinberg. This argument contributes to the promising discourse of how these two artist-writers blurred the divisions between figurative arts and creative writing, each in his own right, by exploring the visual themes of the narrated, and the narrative themes of the visual. Examination is focused on selected Steinberg pieces that represent *Steinbergian* themes, the Calvino essays for Saul Steinberg, and on a combination of extant art criticism and academic scholarship. The goal of this work is to demonstrate that through their mutual transposition of words and images, each artist-writer illuminates the work of the other.

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"The writer looks at the painter's work trying to translate their message into something he would like to communicate." – Italo Calvino¹

In an interview commissioned by *The Paris Review* in 1983, Italo Calvino's long-time translator William Weaver asks Calvino to describe his process in creating a new work.

Calvino responds:

I start with a small, single image and then I enlarge it [...] When I began writing *Invisible Cities* I had only a vague idea of what the frame (and) the architecture of the book would be. But then, little by little, the design became so important that it carried the entire book; it became the plot of a book that had no plot. With *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* we can say the same—the architecture is the book itself. By then I had reached a level of obsession with structure such that I almost became crazy about it. It can be said about *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* that it could not have existed without a very precise, very articulated structure.²

Image, frame, architecture, design and *structure* are artistic terms that Calvino often used to describe his works. In *Invisible Cities* (*Città Invisibili*, 1972) the rigid frame consisting of blocks of titles and numbers is contrasted with vignettes of flexible textual cityscapes. Similarly, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (*Il castello dei destini incrociati*, 1973) features a highly structured architecture containing narratives of shifting identities. The "very articulated" structure of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (*Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, 1979) is built upon two sets of alternating chapters, which contrast with the incipit narratives contained therein. With this latter novel, however, Calvino breaks from the trajectory of his previous works in that he

¹ Italo Calvino, "Lo scrittore guarda le opere del pittore cercando di tradurre ciò che esse gli comunicano in qualcosa che vorrebbe comunicare lui," *La squadratura*, a prefatory note to Giulio Paolini, *IDEM* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), pp.vii-xiv (p.vii). Trans. Franco Ricci in *Painting with Words, Writing in Pictures*, 3.

² I. Calvino, "Italo Calvino, The Art of Fiction No. 130," Interview by William Weaver and Damien Pettigrew. *The Paris Review*. N.p., n.d. Web. 3 Dec. 2010.

uses the medium of language to refer aggressively to his own art. The result is a mirror effect in which the reader, the writer, and the novel become the very subject of the work. This technique becomes apparent in the very first line of the book in which Calvino addresses his reader in the second person, points to himself as the writer, and names his novel: “You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*.”³ [*Stai per cominciare a leggere il nuovo romanzo Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore di Italo Calvino.*]⁴

In this report, I propose that the architectural structure of *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* evolved from Calvino’s personal experience engaging with the figurative arts through ekphrastic writing, namely the essays he composed for the art of Saul Steinberg. I hope to contribute to the promising discourse of how these two artist-writers blurred the divisions between figurative arts and creative writing, each in his own right, by exploring the visual themes of the narrated, and the narrative themes of the visual. I will focus my examination on selected Steinberg pieces that represent reoccurring *Steinbergian* themes, the Calvino essays for Saul Steinberg, and on a combination of extant art criticism and academic scholarship. My goal is to demonstrate that through their mutual transposition of words and images, each artist-writer illuminates the work of the other.

The premise of Calvino’s novel is this: a reader begins reading Italo Calvino’s *If On A Winter’s Night A Traveler* but quickly realizes that the book is defective and incomplete. He takes it back to the bookshop for a replacement, only to discover the replacement book too

³ I. Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, Trans. William Weaver. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981. Print.), 3.

⁴ I. Calvino, *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*, (Milano: Oscar Mondadori, 2010. Print.), 3.

is faulty. Therein lies the pattern. In the alternate chapters we follow the reader's adventures as he tries to obtain a perfect copy of the book. This is interspersed with the actual text samples of the books he acquires, none of which turn out to be the actual *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*. Calvino, however, blurs the lines between the reader's life and the fiction he reads, as characters associated with the reader crossover so that they also appear in the text the reader is reading. Each odd-numbered chapter uses the second-person mode to address the reader directly as "You." Meanwhile, each even-numbered chapter introduces a narrative of a different style or genre, such as satire, romance, or thriller, demonstrating the author's facility with variation or multiplicity.

In 1977, two years prior to the publication of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, Calvino published a series of writings inspired by figurative artists, including Fausto Melotti, Giulio Paolini, Lucio Del Pezzo, Cesare Peverelli, Valerio Adami, Alberto Magnelli, Luigi Serafini, Domenico Gnoli, Giorgio De Chirico, Enrico Baj, and Arakawa.⁵ Calvino wrote two essays to accompany the drawings of Saul Steinberg. *The Pen in the First Person* (*La penna in prima persona*)⁶, originally published as *La plume à la première personne*, is understood to be the first of the two. It first appeared in *Derrière le Miroir*.⁷ This essay was to become Steinberg's favorite description of his works, and he selected it again and again to accompany many of his later

⁵ Claudio Milanini, Bruno Falcetto, and Mario Barenghi, "Encounter with Italo Calvino," *Internet Culturale*. Ministero per i beni e le Attività Culturali, 19 Jan. 2007. Web. 29 Nov. 2010.

⁶ Saul Steinberg, *Still Life and Architecture*, (New York: The Pace Gallery, 1982. Print.) "The Pen in the First Person (for the drawing of Saul Steinberg)," Text by Italo Calvino, translated by William Weaver, originally appeared as *La plume à la première personne* in *Derrière le miroir*, no. 224-May 1977. Print.

⁷ *The Pen in the First Person* appeared in additional Steinberg publications: *Still Life and Architecture*⁷, Steinberg: 4. *Internationale Triennale der Zeichnung*, and *Saul Steinberg*.

publications.⁸ The second essay, entitled *Il crollo del tempo*,⁹ appeared in the literary magazine *il Caffè*. It was written to accompany a series of Saul Steinberg designs that were to have been displayed in an art exhibition that never took place.

Italo Calvino and Saul Steinberg first met circa 1967 in Milan.¹⁰ Ten years later, they reconnected in Paris, at which point Calvino decided to write his first essay for Steinberg.¹¹ By this time, Steinberg was a well-published artist. He was, in fact, Calvino's favorite sketch artist.¹² The two maintained a life-long friendship.¹³ Although Steinberg is best known for his 85 covers and 642 drawings for *The New Yorker*,¹⁴ he also created murals, advertisements, collages, fabric designs, masks, stage sets,¹⁵ and he published many books, including *All in Line* (1945), *The Art of Living* (1949), *The Passport* (1954), *The Labyrinth* (1960), *The New World* (1965), *The Inspector* (1973) and *The Discovery of America* (1993). Born in Romania, he first studied Philosophy at the University of Bucharest. He enrolled at the Department of Architecture at the *Politecnico di Milano* in 1933 and graduated with a degree in architecture in 1940. The importance of his architectural training did not lie in anything he may have designed as an architect (he never designed a single building), but rather in the effects that

⁸ S. Schwartz, "Steinberg and Calvino," Message to Erika Katharine Payán Zanetti. 23 Mar. 2011. E-mail.

⁹ I. Calvino, "Il crollo del tempo," *il Caffè* 1977: 16-22. Print. Text does not have a published English translation, but has been referred to as *The Collapse of Time*.

¹⁰ Schwartz, "Steinberg and Calvino."

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² F. Ricci, *Painting with Words, Writing with Pictures*, (Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 192.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ S. Boxer, "Saul Steinberg, Epic Doodler, Dies at 84," *New York Times* 13 May 1999: n. pag. *The New York Times*. Web. 15 May 2011.

¹⁵ Calvino, "Italo Calvino, The Art of Fiction No. 130."

this training had on his drawing.¹⁶ He often used architectural detail to give his work a strong sense of time and place,¹⁷ which is evident in how his cityscapes resemble navigable maps. During his years at *Politecnico* he began publishing cartoons in the satirical anti-fascist Milanese weekly *Il Bertoldo*, which he co-founded with writer Giovanni Guareschi, and in which Italo Calvino functioned as a collaborator. Steinberg published drawings in the comic tabloid *Settebello*, then later in *Life* magazine and *Harper's Bazaar*. In 1941, Mussolini's anti-Semitic laws forced him to flee Italy and emigrate to New York City. He became a naturalized citizen of the United States and published regularly for the rest of his life in *The New Yorker*.

Steinberg's artwork, which spans six decades, is not firmly tied to a single category or movement, but instead encompasses various genres. "His drawings are, in a sense, anthologies of art history," writes critic Hilton Kramer; "there are Cubist and rococo characters. Expressionist conversations, Renaissance objects. Gothic words and Pointillist emotions."¹⁸ His work is not easily sorted into well-defined periods, as new ideas appeared and faded, and old ideas disappeared, reappeared, were transformed, and were mixed with new ingredients, providing new perspectives on old themes.¹⁹

Early in his career, Steinberg began creating line drawings in which the subject was "the ways artists make art."²⁰ He created an extensive series of self-portraits in which he

¹⁶ Boxer.

¹⁷ R. Neubeck, *The Art and Humor of Saul Steinberg*, Diss. U of Minnesota, 1979. (Ann Arbor: Microfiche, 1979. Print.), 15.

¹⁸ Boxer.

¹⁹ Neubeck, 19.

²⁰ S. Schwartz, dir. "Life and Work," *The Saul Steinberg Foundation*, The Saul Steinberg Foundation, n.d. Web. 29 Nov. 2010.

depicts himself drawing himself with a pen. He designs a design that is designing itself. Steinberg has been called a specialist in the riddles of identity whose art is permeated by an awareness that autobiography is a type of fiction.²¹ Examples of his self-portraits can be seen in **Figures 1, 2, and 3**, which served as covers for Steinberg's 1945 publication, *All in Line*.

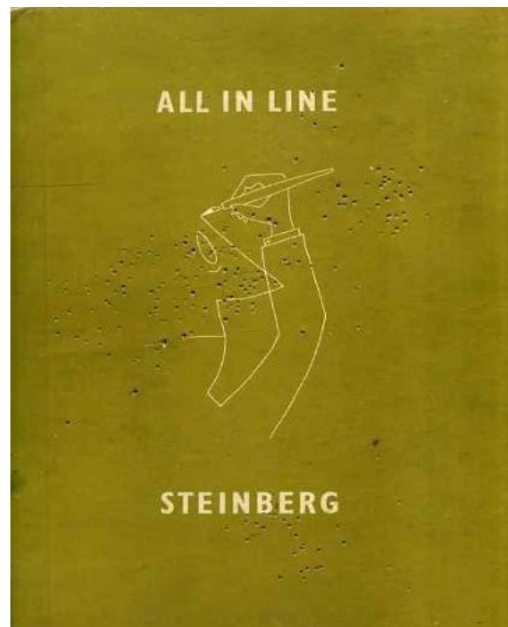


Figure 1. Cover of *All in Line*, Saul Steinberg. Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1945

²¹ H. Rosenberg, Introduction of *Saul Steinberg*, (New York: Knopf, in association with the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978. 10-36. Print.), 12.

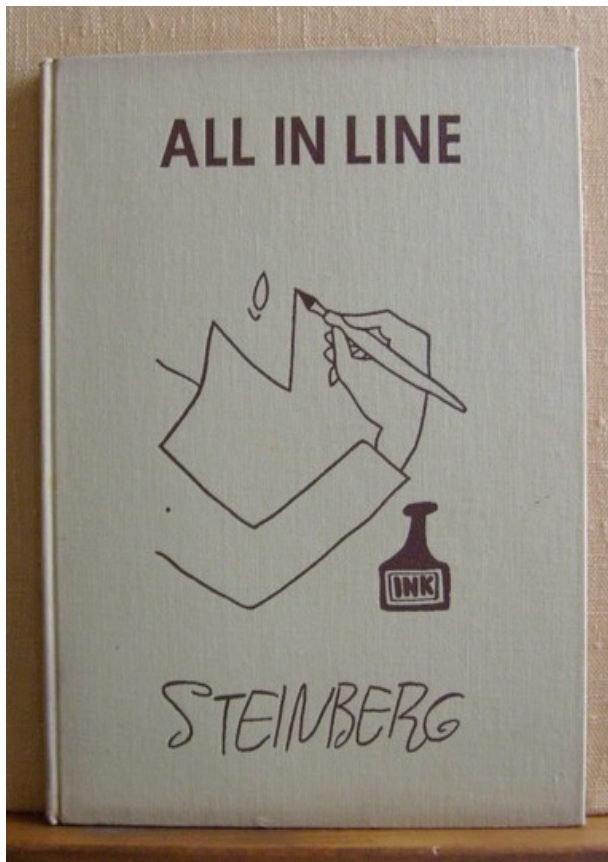


Figure 2. Cover of *All in Line*, Saul Steinberg. Duell, Sloan & Pearce. First edition, 1945.

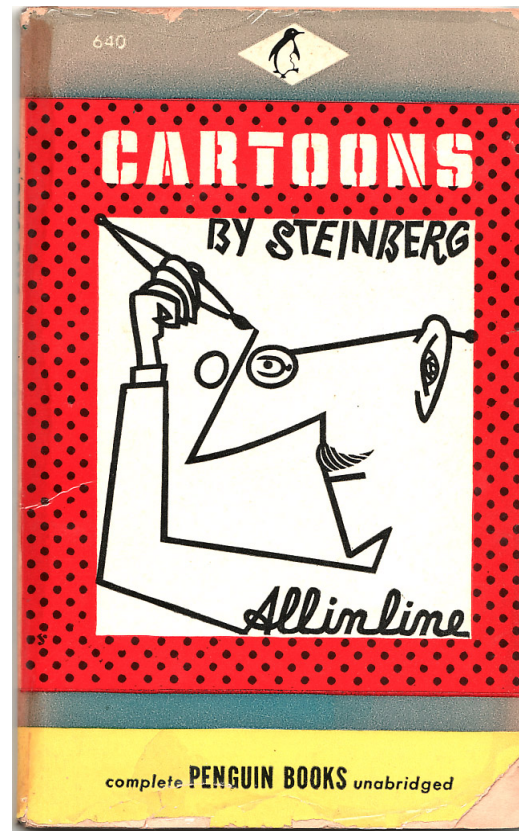


Figure 3. Cover of an early paperback edition of *All in Line*, Saul Steinberg. London: Penguin Books, 1945.

In Figures 1 and 2 the artist draws himself in right profile view, the line tracing his sleeve becoming his chin. His features are reduced to simple shapes of oval, triangle, and line. In his right hand he holds an inked pen, which rests on the point between his expressed nose and implied forehead. In Figure 2 a bottle of ink has been added. It begs further attention, not only to the medium itself, but also to the self-referential source of the drawing, as the pen and ink draw the self-portrait of the artist. The left-profile Steinberg of Figure 3 poses similarly, although his lines are given more weight and detail. The line that traces his sleeve transforms into the words that give the book its title: *All in Line*.

“Everything springs from the artist’s act,” Steinberg said. “The hand that makes the drawing has drawn itself and the pen with which it draws.”²² In **Figure 4**, the figure has shifted to something more surreal. The figure’s head has been replaced by line script, which mimics handwriting but is illegible. The artist-writer’s head explodes with curls of labyrinth-like design-text while everything else remains linear and straight, including the steady hand that records it. The absence of legs symbolizes that drawing and writing are hand-mind activities. These conceptual self-portraits became a reoccurring topic for Steinberg throughout his career and there are countless variations of them.



Figure 4. Untitled. Ink on paper. Published in *Derriere le miroir* (1977), Paris.

²² Rosenberg, 19.

Steinberg regularly described himself as “a writer who draws.”²³ He recalled that at the age of 10 years old he decided to become a novelist, “but I still haven’t made up my mind about that,” he stated.²⁴ The only reason that he did not pursue writing instead of drawing, he commented, is that he was not born into “a good language.”²⁵ He commonly included text in his drawings, both legible and illegible; and in fact, letters, words, and punctuation marks are often the main subjects of his images. Some of his more renowned drawings contain graphic puns that occur when the beholder’s eye is induced to see a word or line as having more than just one purpose or significance. The design in **Figure 5**, for

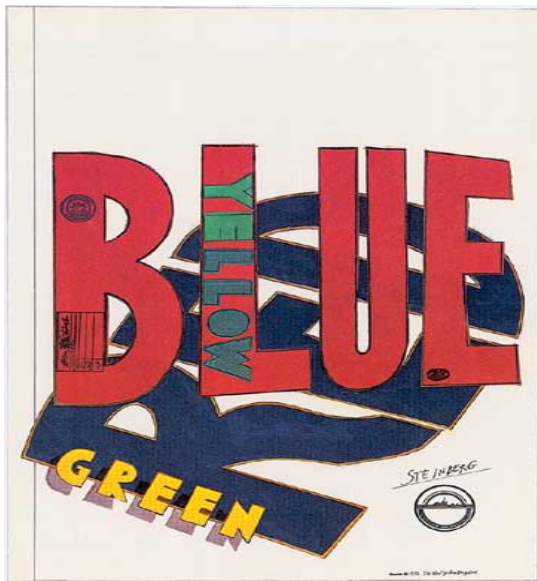


Figure 5. Untitled, 1971. Oil, colored pencil, colored paper, and rubber stamp on paper. 29 1/4 x 21 3/4". Cover drawing for *The New Yorker*, October 21, 1972. The Saul Steinberg Foundation.

example, presents an obvious challenge regarding the relationship between art and text and between the sign and the signified. The viewer simultaneously reads blue, but sees red; reads yellow but sees green; and so on. “The very process of reading is examined in many of the drawings in which the artist explored the very limits of graphic sign,” remarked E.H.

Gombrich in his chapter “The Wit of Saul Steinberg.”²⁶ Figures 6 and 7 similarly

²³ Schwartz, “Life and Work.”

²⁴ Rosenberg, 13.

²⁵ Boxer.

²⁶ E.H. Gombrich, *Topics of Our Time*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1991. Print.), 191.

combine writing and image, the verbal and the visual. Steinberg creates a complex narrative of the crime fiction or mystery genre with *Who did it?* (**Figure 6**). Steinberg describes his design:

It's obvious that WHO did it. And exactly the H of WHO shaped so as to push the D of DID, another word who obviously did it by its nature of doing and by the inclination of the two D's to roll and crush IT; more exactly, the I of IT. And who asks the question? None other than the Question Mark itself, facing and judging the fact. The three men are around for the sake of scale and animism.²⁷

Similarly, *Yes But* (**Figure 7**) is an example of narrative art. It contains a protagonist (the man who rides upon YES) and an antagonist (BUT). It exhibits a plot sequence that must be read from left to right, just as lines in a book.

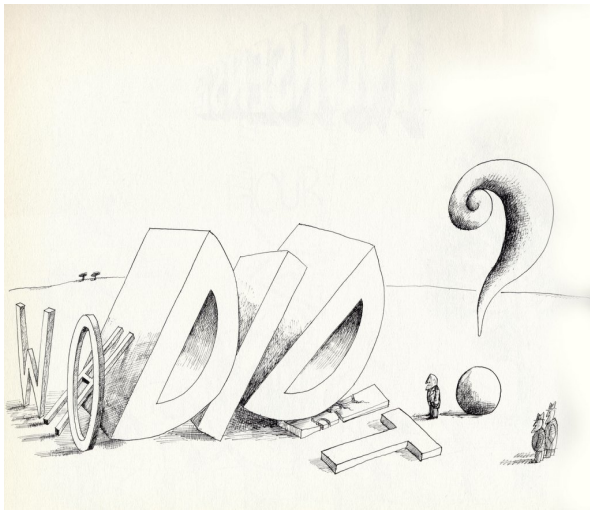


Figure 6. *Who Did It?* The Saul Steinberg Foundation.



Figure 7. *Yes But.* The Saul Steinberg Foundation.

²⁷ Rosenberg, 10.

Often Steinberg's drawings poke fun at the art of drawing. The artist grows out of his own pen, but winds up as a square or becomes entangled in his own Rococo fancies or unable to break out of a never-ending spiral.²⁸ Often, the situations created by Steinberg contain clues that are either too various or too sparse to make any single interpretation of the meaning of a "correct" line, and therefore the audience must choose to accept ambiguity.

"By forcing his audience to look at the seemingly familiar in new, disorienting contexts, Steinberg unsettles (the audience) and demands that it constantly reinterpret its visual vocabulary," Ralph Neubeck writes in his 1979 dissertation on Steinberg.²⁹ Steinberg's visual language is a thin, sharp line that always remarks on its own existence: "What I draw is drawing, [and] drawing derives from drawing. My line wants to remind constantly that it's made of ink," he said; "I appeal to the complicity of my reader who will transform this line into meaning by using our common background of culture, history, poetry.

Contemporaneity in this is a complicity."³⁰ Steinberg's art demands a readerly-writerly audience who is also willing to participate as a collaborator. His art functions as a communication process involving the communicator, the object of communication, and the audience. His series of *Drawing Table* constructions, which he began in the 1970s, is an example of this theme. The drawing tables include the tools that one might expect to see on Steinberg's actual table --colored pencils, pens, brushes, and the like; however, they are not real, but are instead carved models. Through these constructions Steinberg places his audience in a participatory role. The viewer must contemplate what is fictitious

²⁸ Boxer.

²⁹ Neubeck, 80.

³⁰ Rosenberg, 19. Gombrich, 192.

representation, what is reality, and what is the relationship between the two. Steinberg places himself in a variation of the role of autobiographer, communicating his craft through symbols of his work objects while enlisting the participation of the viewer.

Calvino owned at least two Steinberg pieces, which he kept in his studio.³¹ One of these has been identified as a *drawing table* (**Figure 8**).³² Its mixed media assemblage



Figure 8. A work by Saul Steinberg, owned by Calvino. Encounter with Italo Calvino, Internet Culturale.

combines eye-fooling representations of a ruler, the cover of a journal or sketchbook, a cucumber slice, an open box of matches, a small yellow pencil alongside an artist pen engraved with the initials ST, a sheet of paper with a drawing, a white cube sketched in chalk, and the stamp of an official seal.

Upon closer examination of the drawing, two male figures can be observed standing near the edge of a cliff looking towards an abyss

of blankness. In this worktable collage

Steinberg represents himself in the first-

person with his initials on the pen (in

addition to his signature and date in the bottom right corner), pointing to himself as the

creator, or author, of the piece. Steinberg's creative process is represented with his various

³¹ Baranelli, Luca, and Ernesto Ferrero, eds. *Album Calvino*, (Milano: Oscar Mondadori, 1995. Print.), 290.

³² Claudio Milanini, Bruno Falcetto, and Mario Barenghi, "Encounter with Italo Calvino," *Internet Culturale*. Ministero per i beni e le Attività Culturali, 19 Jan. 2007. Web. 29 Nov. 2010.

tools, and each works to bridge the gap between art and life. Additionally, Steinberg generates a narrative within a narrative by adding his drawing of two men on a cliff in reflection of the blank horizon. It is tempting to imagine that these two men represent Calvino and Steinberg, and the empty horizon is their blank sheet. Finally, the viewer has his role – the role of the inspector. In sum, the drawing table deals aggressively with the artist, his craft from start to finish, and the role of his viewer. This is a model of collaborative reciprocity between the artist or author and his audience that Steinberg and Calvino seem to have shared.

It is unclear what additional Steinberg piece hung in Calvino's studio; however, one supposition is that it was drawing that adorned the book cover of *Una pietra sopra* (1979), a collection of Calvino essays amongst which appears *The Pen in the First Person*. In the drawing

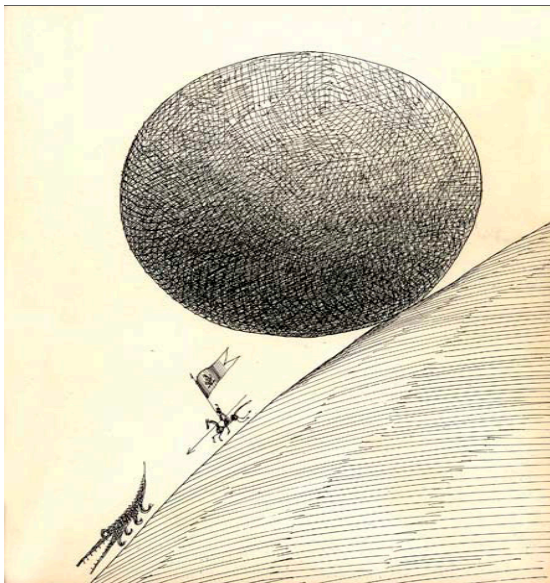


Figure 9. Saul Steinberg. Untitled, 1968. Originally published in *The New Yorker*, December 28, 1968. The Saul Steinberg Foundation. Cover of *Una pietra sopra*, Italo Calvino, 1979.

(**Figure 9**) a gigantic spherical boulder rolls dangerously down a steep slope in pursuit of a tiny knight in full armor mounted on a galloping horse. The knight, in turn, is in pursuit of a crocodile, which flees from both the knight and the boulder. According to the Saul Steinberg Foundation this image also served as the book cover image for French editions of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (although it is uncertain that Calvino chose this image for that book). A handwritten

letter expresses Calvino's fondness for and identification with the image, and his desire for the design to accompany *Una pietra sopra*. Calvino writes to Steinberg that he is about to publish a volume of his essays, which includes *The Pen in the First Person*. Calvino identifies the story of his life with the narrative of the drawing—a knight who hunts monsters becomes swept away by a snowball that has the shape of the world and all its weight.³³ Calvino adds that he thinks the drawing would give the book ample meaning, replacing the necessity for a written introduction.

Steinberg's place in art history is a unique one. It has already been stated that Steinberg does not fit into any one category. Additionally, "the restrictions of the line drawing have not prevented Steinberg from being the peer of Pirandello, Beckett, (and) Ionesco," remarked Harold Rosenberg, one of Saul Steinberg's earliest and most eloquent supporters.³⁴ Some scholars and critics note that there are affinities between Steinberg's style and what became known later as the postmodern movement. Tom Lubbock, illustrator and former chief art critic at *The Independent*, remarks on the originality of Steinberg. He paints Steinberg as an artist fluent in multiple styles and movements. If there are postmodern tendencies in Steinberg's art, it is because he was a visionary and a "progenitor" of a certain style that would be repeated later by postmodern artists. Lubbock writes:

Saul Steinberg was an original. He invented a new form of cartooning. You might call it conceptual cartooning, or self-referential cartooning, or cartooning-about-cartooning. He had his own style, true – a distinctive,

³³ Calvino, *Letter to Saul Steinberg, April 15, 1980* concerning the book of Calvino essays with a Steinberg drawing on the cover. [pdf 0611, 0612] Location: box 12, folder "Special Letters n.d." The Saul Steinberg Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, Uncat. Mss. 126.

³⁴ Rosenberg, 12.

wonky-elegant drawn line. But he also played with style, with numerous styles, and with the languages of cartooning and drawing generally.³⁵

Laura Cumming, art critic for *The Observer*, writes an essay that also touches on the topic of Steinberg and postmodernism. Specifically, she focuses on Steinberg's most recognized and celebrated image, *View of the World from 9th Avenue* (**Figure 10**) -- an ink, pencil, and watercolor that served as the cover for *The New Yorker* on March 29, 1976.



Figure 10. *View of the World from 9th Avenue*. Ink, pencil, colored pencil, and watercolor on paper, 28x19". Cover drawing for *The New Yorker*, March 29, 1976.

³⁵ T. Lubbock, "Manhattan's doodle dandy: Is there any depth to Saul Steinberg's cartoons?" *The Independent*. Dulwich Picture Gallery, 27 Nov. 2008. Web. 15 May 2011.

She muses on Steinberg's influences and his self-reflexive themes. She too believes that Steinberg predates postmodernism, but that his art demonstrates characteristics of the movement:

(View of the World from 9th Avenue) combines most of Steinberg's virtues: elegance, wit, a fascination with maps, letters, numbers and parallel worlds, a droll and calligraphic line that has often been associated with Paul Klee. Steinberg's brisk retort to this comparison was that the two merely shared the same influences: 'children's drawings, peasant embroideries, insane art ... and Bauhausy philosophy', plus a deep and thorough knowledge of modern painting. These influences converged to produce a self-consciousness that might have been called postmodern if the term had yet been invented.³⁶

American artist and writer Ben La Rocco addresses the question as to whether or not Steinberg was a postmodernist. He finds supporting evidence in the way that Steinberg creates an “encyclopedic study of styles” in a single image,³⁷ but on the other hand finds contradicting evidence in the writings of Harold Rosenberg. Rosenberg concluded that the artist was really interested in the “mystery of individual identity,” rather than the postmodernist concern with the “status of images and the destruction of authenticity.”³⁸ La Rocco also cites Adam Gopnik who in his essay on Steinberg dispels a possible ironic underpinning: “If we mean by irony a kind of false naiveté—if it involves some discrepancy between the way something is shown to us and what we suspect the artist doing the showing actually thinks, Steinberg’s work is almost entirely without irony.”³⁹ Like the others, La Rocco concludes that Steinberg was a precursor to postmodern artists. “It is, after all, the

³⁶ L. Cumming, “The man who put the inking into thinking,” *The Observer*. Dulwich Picture Gallery, 7 Dec. 2008. Web. 15 May 2011.

³⁷ Ben La Rocco, “Saul Steinberg (Pace Wildenstein),” *Brooklyn Rail* Apr. 2005: n. pag. Web. 15 May 2011.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

mark of a master to contain the seeds of a style in his work without being subject to the strictures that confine the style he creates,” he writes.⁴⁰

French academic, art critic, and novelist Philippe Dagen adds to the discourse with his essay "*Steinberg, postmoderne?*", which appeared in the catalogue for a 2009-2010 exhibition in Strasbourg entitled *Saul Steinberg. L'écriture visuelle*. He seems to suggest in a slightly heavier, yet careful way that Steinberg's art plays a prominent role in the postmodern movement. He employs the terms *multiplicity* and *lightness* to describe Steinberg's art -- terms that Calvino defined in his lectures that were to be delivered at Harvard University published in 1988 as *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* [*Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*]; Dagen, however, makes no mention of Calvino in his essay. Dagen observes postmodern traits specifically in Steinberg's one-sheet drawings in which multiple characters demonstrate varying styles. He writes, "In one of his portraits of family or group, the mother, father, children or neighbors each have their own figurative mode."⁴¹ ["*Dans l'un de ses portraits de famille ou de groupe, la mère, le père, les enfants ou les voisins ont chacun leur mode figuratif propre.*"]⁴² Steinberg's work exhibits variety, "multiplicity of modes of expression" and has an "elegance of lightness" with a rare intelligence.⁴³ Dagen concludes, "What is called postmodernism might find its definition here: a time of

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Philippe Dagen, "Steinberg, postmoderne?" *Saul Steinberg. L'écriture visuelle*. Comp. Thérèse Willer. Strasbourg: Musée Tomi Ungerer, 2010. 28-33. PDF file, 32. Translation is my own.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Dagen, 33.

creation where everything is possible at the same time.” [*“Ce que l’on nomme post-modernisme pourrait trouver ici sa définition : un temps de la création où tout est possible en même temps.”*⁴⁴]

Dagen too is struck by the interweaving of drawing and writing that exists in Steinberg’s *oeuvre*. He notes that Steinberg’s designs are structured like a language and function as a language functions, much like compound signs. To Dagen, Steinberg’s drawings depicting a fat lady socialite, or a pair of clumsy lovers, or a sly cat, or a city filled with skyscrapers function like signs and words that are immediately clear and comprehensible.⁴⁵ These graphic signs are arranged in compositions that function as aphorisms, fables, and narratives.⁴⁶ In their reading, Dagen states, it is important to consider everything about the figures: their proportions, their expressions, the objects and places mentioned, their remarkable economy of means, and their stylistic differentiations. Steinberg then must literally be read as a text.⁴⁷ Steinberg successfully abolishes the distinction between writing and drawing.⁴⁸ Degan’s application of Calvino’s qualities of literature to Steinberg’s designs is particularly clever, not only because he advances his proposition that Steinberg contributes to postmodern art, but also because he recognizes and pays tribute to the artist’s *writerly* mind.

Just as Saul Steinberg was a writer who drew, Italo Calvino was an artist who wrote. In fact, before young Calvino chose to become a writer, he experimented with drawing. His

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Dagen, 29.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Dagen, 32.

sketches, often image-text vignettes, were published in *Il Bertoldo*.⁴⁹ Among his first sketches are a 1942 self-portrait caricature with exaggerated eyebrows (**Figure 11**), a Ligurian peasant holding a pickaxe (**Figure 12**), and a very overweight Mussolini on horseback (**Figure 13**).⁵⁰

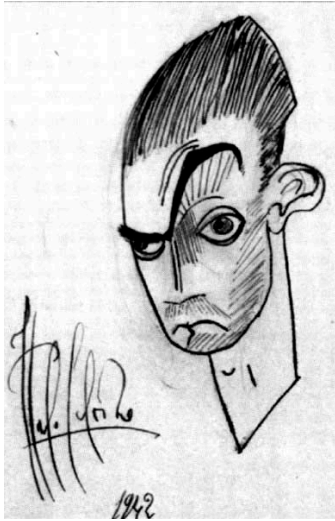


Figure 11. Self-portrait, 1942. Italo Calvino. Incontro con Italo Calvino, Internet Culturale.

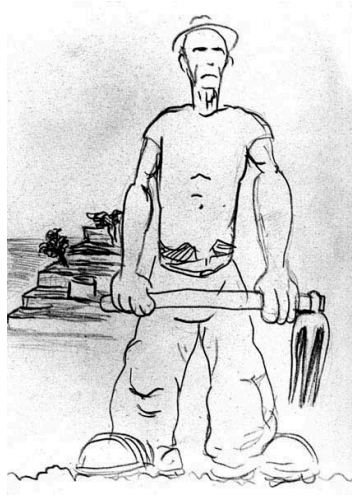


Figure 12. Untitled, Calvino. Encounter with Italo Calvino, Internet Culturale.

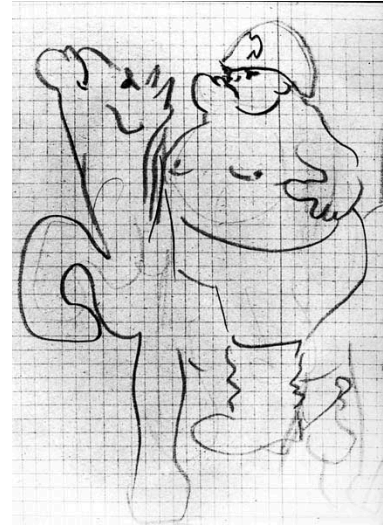


Figure 13. Mussolini by Calvino. Encounter with Italo Calvino, Internet Culturale.

Calvino tells Weaver about how before he wanted to be a writer, he wanted to be an artist:

Before I had done any writing at all, my passion was drawing; I drew caricatures of my classmates, my teachers. Fanciful drawings, but with no training. When I was a little boy, my mother enrolled me in a correspondence drawing course; the first thing of mine ever published—I don't have a copy now and have been unable to find one—was a drawing. I was eleven years old. It appeared in a magazine published by this correspondence school; I was their youngest pupil. [...] But when I began writing in earnest I felt my drawing lacked any sort of style; I hadn't developed one. So I gave up drawing.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Baranelli et al., 48.

⁵⁰ Milanini et al.

⁵¹ Calvino, "Italo Calvino, The Art of Fiction No. 130."

This passage demonstrates Calvino's natural artistic predisposition, clear from an early age. Throughout his life he remained an admirer of the arts. In his essay on *Visibility* Calvino points to art as his inspiration for his writing. He writes, "I have adopted the method of telling my own stories, starting from pictures famous in the history of art or at any rate pictures that have made an impact of me."⁵² For this reason, Calvino's ekphrastic essays written specifically for the figurative arts in which he traces the visual image into verbal poetry are particularly noteworthy.

It is not entirely clear if Calvino had access to Steinberg's designs that were to appear in the issue of *Derrière le miroir*, or if instead he wrote *The Pen in the First Person* more generally about Steinberg's *oeuvre*. The latter is more likely in that Calvino seems to dedicate his writing to design concepts that appeared both very early and several years into Steinberg's career. Wherever possible, and with the help of the Saul Steinberg Foundation, I have included an image that illustrates the concept that Calvino's words seem to explore. Additionally, I have included alongside my analysis of Steinberg's essays, the responses of Calvino's critics. Only a handful of Calvino scholars mention Steinberg -- his name usually appears in list-form alongside other artists whom Calvino admired. Few academics deal with *The Pen in the First Person* and even fewer with *Il crollo del tempo*. Those that have dealt directly with the essays provide evidence that supports my argument of influence.

Calvino opens *The Pen in the First Person (for the Drawings of Saul Steinberg)* by identifying

⁵² Italo Calvino, "Visibility" in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Patrick Creagh. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 94.

Guido Cavalcanti (one of Calvino's poets of *Lightness*⁵³) as "the first writer to consider the instruments and actions of his own work as its true subject" [*il primo a considerare gli strumenti e i gesti della propria attività come il vero soggetto dell'opera*].⁵⁴ Cavalcanti wrote a sonnet in which the pens and the tools used for cutting and sharpening them speak in the first person. The sonnet begins: "We are the sad, dismayed pens, the scissors and the sorrowing knife" [*Noi sian le triste penne isbigottite, le cesovizze e 'l coltellin dolente...*].⁵⁵ According to Calvino, Cavalcanti "opens modern poetry" with this acknowledgment of his instruments and craft. "He opens it," writes Calvino, "and he closes it" [*La apre e la chiude*].⁵⁶ According to Calvino, Saul Steinberg is the one who reopens it:

The pen that Cavalcanti dropped is picked up by Steinberg. It is the pen as subject of graphic action. Every line presupposes a pen drawing it, and every pen presupposes a hand holding it. What lies beyond the hand is a debated question: the I who draws is identified with a drawn I, not the drawing's subject but its object. Or rather, it is the universe of drawing that draws itself, explores, tests, and redefines itself each time.⁵⁷

[*La penna che Cavalcanti ha lasciato cadere viene raccolta da Steinberg. È la penna soggetto dell'azione grafica. Ogni linea presuppone una penna che la traccia, e ogni penna presuppone una mano che la impugna. Che cosa ci sia dietro la mano, è questione controversa: l'io disegnante finisce per identificarsi con un io disegnato, non soggetto ma oggetto del disegnatore. O meglio, è l'universo del disegno che si disegna, che si esplora ed esperimenta e ridefinisce ogni volta.*]⁵⁸

⁵³ I. Calvino, *Lezioni americane: Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, (Milano: Oscar Mondadori, 2010. Print.)

⁵⁴ I. Calvino, "La penna in prima persona (per i disegni di Saul Steinberg)," *Una pietra sopra*. (Milano: Oscar Mondadori, 1995. 355-362. Print.), 355.

⁵⁵ Guido Cavalcanti, "Rime," *Poeti del Duecento*. Ed. Gianfranco Contini. Vol. II. Milano, Napoli: n.p., 1960. N. pag. *Liber Liber*. Web. 15 May 2011.

⁵⁶ Italo Calvino, "La penna in prima persona (per i disegni di Saul Steinberg)," 355.

⁵⁷ Saul Steinberg, *Still Life and Architecture*, (New York: The Pace Gallery, 1982. Print.) "The Pen in the First Person (for the drawings of Saul Steinberg)." Text by Italo Calvino, translated by William Weaver, originally appeared in *Derrière le miroir*, no. 224-May 1977.

⁵⁸ Calvino, "La penna in prima persona (per i disegni di Saul Steinberg)," 355.

Calvino's passage evokes the image of a mirror in which reality is reflected, but nonetheless is distinct from its fictitious reflection. Fiction, whether it be written or drawn, possesses the ability to redesign reality. Calvino uses the terms *subject* and *object*. Each subject has its opposite in object – its own mirror, through which it reflects itself to itself.

A 1944 drawing (**Figure 14**) and a 1948 drawing (**Figure 15**) represent the *mise en abîme* phenomenon that Calvino describes. In the first image (Figure 14), the legs of the artist extend out in front of him as he sketches with a pen on a sheet of paper that which he sees in that very moment, which are his legs extended out in front of him with a sheet of paper on which he is sketching.

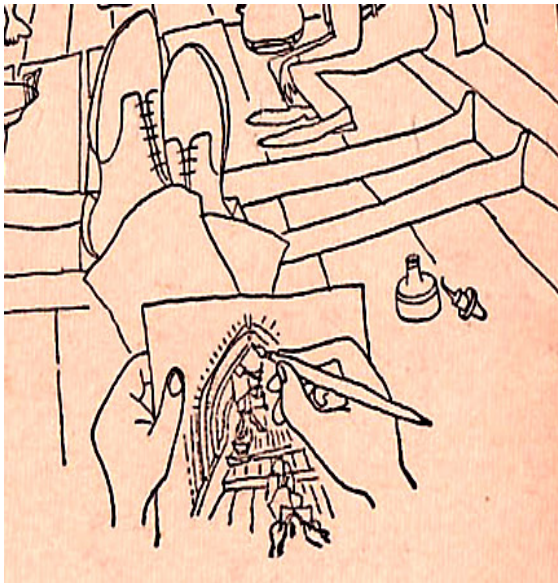


Figure 14. Saul Steinberg *Untitled* 1944. Originally published in Steinberg, *All in Line*, 1949.



Figure 15. *Untitled*, 1948. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Saul Steinberg Foundation.

Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* is built on this very *mise en abîme* technique: the reader is simultaneously reading a story and reading about the act of reading a story.⁵⁹ In the second image (Figure 15), Saul Steinberg depicts himself tracing a long spiraling line, which transforms into his left foot, then his left leg, then his right leg, then the entire right side of his body and face, until it finally reaches his hand, which holds the pen that draws the line that once again becomes the spiral. In these two images the "I who draws" is one in the same with the "drawn I."

Calvino continues his essay by cleverly using spiraling lines of text to illustrate further how Steinberg's sheet of paper devours reality:

The drawn world has an aggressiveness of its own... (Steinberg's art) invades the desk, captures anything alien to it, joins all lines to its own life, overflows the page... No, it is the outside world that enters and becomes part of the page: the pen, the hand, the artist, the desk, the cat... No, it is the substance of the graphic sign that is revealed as the true substance of the world.⁶⁰

*[Il mondo disegnato ha una sua prepotenza... (L'arte di Steinberg) invade il tavolo, cattura ciò che gli è estraneo, unifica tutte le linee alla sua linea, dilaga dal foglio. No, è il mondo esterno che entra a far parte del foglio: la penna, la mano, l'artista, il tavolo, il gatto.... No, è la sostanza del segno grafico che si rivela come la vera sostanza del mondo, lo svolazzò o arabesco o filo di scrittura fitta fitta febbrile nevrotica che si sostituisce ad ogni altro mondo possibile.]*⁶¹

In other words, the existing distinctions between reality and fiction become indistinct. Man, too, he adds, is not exempt from being devoured by the page (**Figure 16**). Calvino recreates this concept in his novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, beginning with an aggressive second-person address to the reader, and expanding the theme as the characters of the frame

⁵⁹ Dani Cavallaro, *The Mind of Italo Calvino: A Critical Exploration of His Thought and Writings*, (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010. Print.), 166.

⁶⁰ Calvino, "The Pen in the First Person."

⁶¹ Calvino, "La penna in prima persona (per i disegni di Saul Steinberg)," 355.

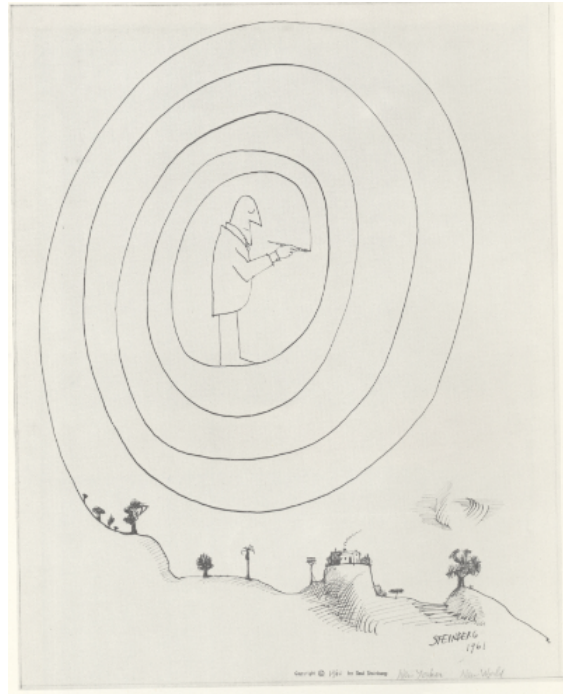


Figure 16. Untitled, 1961. New World. New Yorker.

narrative become characters within the content narrative. By utilizing a *Steinbergian* structure, Calvino creates his own conceptual art, in which the world is transformed into written line by an author in control of the pen. The spectator and author merge with the work and, in turn, fiction seeps into reality. Continuing with *The Pen in the First Person*, Calvino writes:

The world is transformed into line, a single line, broken, twisted, discontinuous. Man too. And this man transformed into line is, in the end, master of the world, though he cannot escape his condition as prisoner, because, after many scrolls and curlicues, the line tends to close in on itself and entrap the man-line. But he is surely his own master, because he can construct or dismantle himself, segment by segment, and as a final way out he can commit suicide with two, criss-crossed strokes of the pen, to discover that crossed-out death is made of the same substance as drawing-life, a movement of the pen on the page.⁶²

⁶² Calvino, "The Pen in the First Person."

[Il mondo è trasformato in linea, un'unica linea spezzata, contorta, discontinua. L'uomo anche. E quest'uomo trasformato in linea è finalmente il padrone del mondo, pur non sfuggendo alla sua condizione di prigioniero, perché la linea tende dopo molte volute e ghirigori a rinchiudersi su se stessa prendendolo in trappola. Ma certamente l'uomo-linea è padrone di se stesso perché può costituirsi o de-costituirsi segmento per segmento e, come ultima scappatoia, gli resta quella di suicidarsi con due tratti di penna incrociati, per scoprire che la morte-cancellatura è fatta della stessa costanza della vita-disegno, un movimento della penna sul foglio.]⁶³

There is no doubt that Calvino here makes mention of an image (**Figure 17**) in



Figure 17. Steinberg, The passport, 1954.

which Steinberg traces a criss-cross over his face composed of two single lines. During the writing of the Steinberg essay, Calvino becomes fascinated with the artist's use of lines and he eloquently traces them with his lyrical prose. Calvino incorporates *Steinberg-esque* lines into his novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* in the form text and plot lines. The real world of author and reader is transformed into written line as they appear as

characters in the novel. The structure of the book is composed of two overarching narrative lines: the frame narrative (the chapters numbered 1, 2, 3...) and narrative incipits (which are assigned titles). A thick single line traces the frame narrative, with its uniting characters and plots, such as the courtship plot and the reading plot. Broken, discontinuous, and segmented lines of all styles draw the narrative incipits, each with a different genre, each unfinished. Calvino includes another line in his novel. It is a thin meandering line that draws commonalities such as names, places, and themes that link one story to the next. In

⁶³ Calvino, "La penna in prima persona (per i disegni di Saul Steinberg)," 356.

her chapter entitled “The Universal Library” Dani Cavallaro traces this line as it links numerous characters:

(...) the characters in the *incipits* titled “Outside the town of Malbork” and “Leaning from the steep slope” share the same names, and Kauderer features again in “Without fear of wind or vertigo”; Jan’s widow in “Outside of the town of Malbork” brings back to mind the Jan murdered in “If on a winter’s night a traveler”; the Nouvelle Titania of “Looks down in the gathering shadow” appears as New Titania in “Without fear of wind or vertigo”; the character of Amaranta, prominent in “Around an empty graves,” features again in “What story down there awaits its end?,” this time merely as a name on a page torn from a book.⁶⁴

Only a perceptive reader is able trace these commonalities as markers that connect one text to another, while for the unperceptive reader they might represent strange coincidences or they may go undetected altogether. Additionally, lines spiral in the incipit “Without fear of wind or vertigo”:

I tried to escape, insinuating myself with crawling movements toward the center of the spirals, where the lines slithered like serpents following the writhing of Irina’s limbs, supple and restless, in a slow dance where it is not the rhythm that counts but the knotting and loosening of serpentine lines.⁶⁵

[*Cercavo di sfuggire addentrandomi con movimenti striscianti verso il centro della spirale dove le linee sgusciavano come serpenti seguendo il contorcersi delle membra d'Irina, snodate e inquiete, in una lenta danza in cui non è il ritmo che importa ma l'annodarsi e lo sciogliersi di linee serpentine.*]⁶⁶

And finally the incipit titles join together to create one continuous narrative line: *If on a winter’s night a traveler outside the town of Malbork learning from the steep slope without fear of wind or vertigo looks down in the gathering shadow in a network of lines that enlase in a network of lines that intersect on the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon around an empty grave. What story down there*

⁶⁴ Cavallaro, 156.

⁶⁵ Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, Trans. William Weaver. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981. Print.), 89.

⁶⁶ Italo Calvino, *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*, (Milano: Oscar Mondadori, 2010. Print.), 88.

awaits its end? [Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore, fuori dall'abitato di Malbork, sporgendosi dalla costa scoscesa senza temere il vento e la vertigine, guarda in basso dove l'ombra s'addensa in una rete di linee che s'allacciano, in una rete di linee che s'intersecano sul tappeto di foglie illuminate dalla luna intorno a una fossa vuota. Quale storia, laggiù, attende la fine?]

In his chapter entitled “Painted Stories and Novel Spaces” concerning Calvino’s relationship to word and image, Franco Ricci dedicates a brief section to an examination of *The Pen in the First Person*. He too notes Calvino’s preoccupation with drawn lines and seems to attribute them, at least in part, to the designs of Saul Steinberg. Lines appear in *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, Ricci writes, as “suspended plot lines that go nowhere.” Ricci then traces the line outside the confines of the book, and finds:

These narrative lines successfully bridge the mature author’s moments of protean creation, the young Calvino’s passion for drawing and his admitted affinity with the carefully circumscribed and provocative compositions of the artist Saul Steinberg.⁶⁷

For Ricci, these lines connect the real life Calvino to his fictional novel. In this case, in order to fully trace all the lines of *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, one must look to outside the lines of text, into the architectural structure of the book, and beyond.

Returning to *The Pen in the First Person*, Calvino comments on *Steinbergian* themes of multiplicity and unity which were so prominently exhibited in his designs:

The consubstantiality of the drawn world and the I is only relative, however, because within it many universes open up, parallel and incompatible among themselves. In one dimension, linear thread-like figures move; in another minutely decorated figures. A world without thickness is detached from a world that is all volume; a continent where everything is suggested by outlines and one where everything is shaded do not seem to have any meeting place. And so the universes are multiplied

⁶⁷ Ricci, 239.

by the number of instruments and techniques and styles that can be used to give form to the figures and signs. But perhaps, deep down, the styles know they are not self-sufficient; perhaps each of them knows it exists only in contrast with every other possible style.⁶⁸

*[Questa consustanzialità dell'universo disegnato e dell'io è però solo relativa, perché all'interno di essa si aprono tanti universi paralleli incompatibili tra loro: in una dimensione si muovono figure filiformi, in un'altra figura minuziosamente ornata; un mondo senza spessore si distacca da un mondo tutto volume; un continente dove tutto è suggerito dai contorni e uno dove tutto è ombreggiatura sembrano non avere punti di contatto, e così gli universi si moltiplicano per il numero degli strumenti e delle tecniche e degli stili che si possono usare per dare forma a figure e a segni. Ma forse gli stili in cuor loro sanno di non essere autosufficienti; forse ognuno di essi sa d'esistere soltanto in contrasto con ogni altro stile possibile.]*⁶⁹

This passage seems key to what later evolved into the architectural blueprint for the structure of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. The model Calvino employs to construct the chapters of his novel is relative and flexible. Multiple universes grow out of the narratives, in which different styles are merely sampled, but are left incomplete, so that the reader is left dangling, never to find out what happens next. In this sense it is an exercise of multiplicity different from that of *Invisible Cities* wherein the variation is an exercise of multiplying formulaically, and wherein each cityscape is an independent, self-contained work of art. In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* Calvino uses the theme of multiplicity to create incompatible stories that share the same space. The stories themselves are not self-sufficient, and cannot stand alone outside the context of the book, but instead completely rely on each other and on the overarching frame to unite them. *The Pen in the First Person* continues with this thread:

Steinberg's irresistible vocation, or let's say the historic mission to which he has been called, is to move in a space of limitless dimensions of the drawn and the drawable, to establish communication between the most contradictory stylistic universes, to make elements belonging to divergent figurative cultures or conventions of

⁶⁸ Calvino, "The Pen in the First Person."

⁶⁹ Calvino, "La penna in prima persona (per i disegni di Saul Steinberg)," 357.

perception coexist within the horizon of the same page.⁷⁰

*[La vocazione irresistibile di Steinberg, diciamo la missione storica a cui è stato chiamato, è quella di muoversi nello spazio a "n" dimensioni del disegno e del disegnabile, di stabilire una comunicazione tra gli universi stilistici più contraddittori, di far coesistere entro l'orizzonte dello stesso foglio elementi appartenenti a culture figurative o a convenzioni percettive divergenti.]*⁷¹

Calvino accomplishes this very mission with his novel, establishing communication and connecting each unique chapter to the one that it precedes. The theme of multiplicity is combined with the theme of unity. Cavallaro describes it in these words:

The novel's map (...) displays a disconcerting juxtaposition of competing patterns and constellations, delivering a harlequinade of tumultuously clashing images and drives in a paradoxical harmony born of cacophony.⁷²

Calvino combines vast variations of technique, style, and genre and unifies them within the boundaries of his canvas -- the novel.

⁷⁰ Calvino, "The Pen in the First Person."

⁷¹ Calvino, "La penna in prima persona (per i disegni di Saul Steinberg)," 358.

⁷² Cavallaro, 147.



Figure 18. Untitled 1971. Originally published in *Derriere le miroir*, Paris.

Steinberg's 1971 colored-pencil piece featuring a dancing couple captures this idea of multiplicity of style in a unified space (**Figure 18**). A man is drawn in black-and-white careful detail. His tailored suit shows wrinkles, and his hair is neatly parted to the left side. His prominent chin underscores the features of his face. Dancing with the elegant male figure is a colorful female figure who looks as though she escaped from the drawing of a child. Her neck and torso are represented with a green circle with brown

spots. Her arms and legs are sticks, and her shoes are rectangles. Her head is composed of broad geometric shapes. Although each figure opposes the other stylistically, the two dance as a couple. A second example of Steinberg's unity of multiplicity is the image entitled *Twenty Americans* (1975) (**Figure 19**) in which every walk of American life makes a passport-photo-like appearance in a celebration of variation and genre on a single page. In a final example of this *Steinbergian* theme of unified multiplicity, a family sits to have their portrait made (**Figure 20**). Each member is drawn in a distinctly unique style: a grandmother is sketched with back-and-forth lines, a grandfather is drawn in careful detail, an elder daughter is slightly blurred, her husband is boldly outlined, a baby is a child's drawing, the dog is stippled with dots, and so on. Nonetheless, there they are on the same canvas appearing as a

unit.

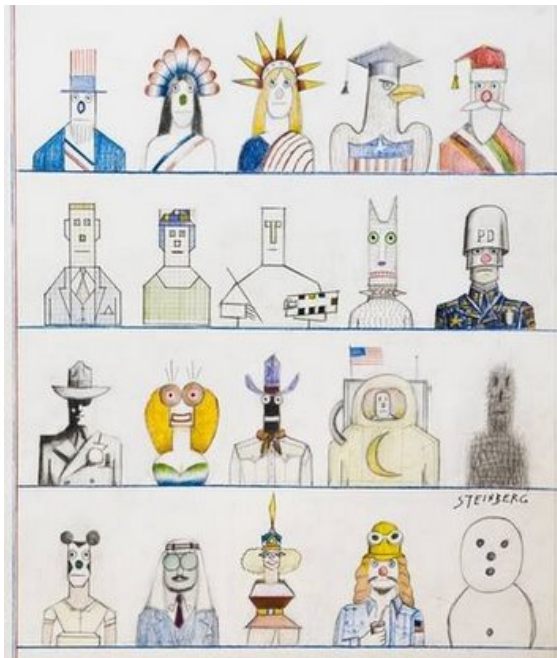


Figure 19. *Twenty Americans*, 1975. The Saul Steinberg Foundation.

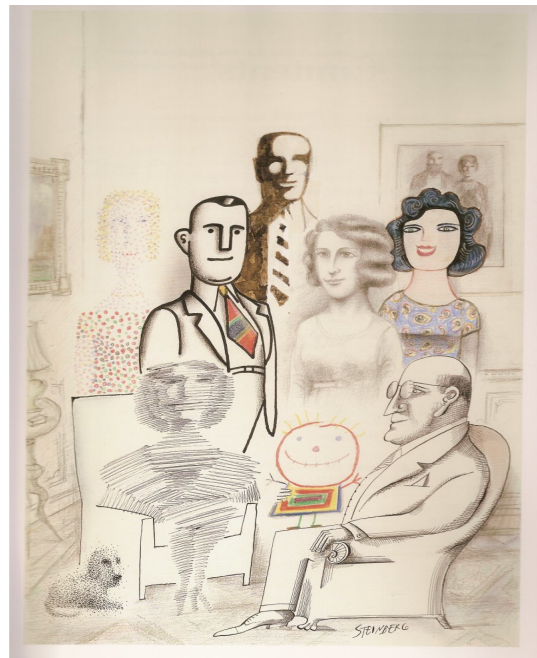


Figure 20. A variation on an image that appeared in *The Passport*, New York, 1954.

The Pen in the First Person next describes what can only be Steinberg's *drawing tables* in which the art objects become art's subject:

The countless and multiform ways of using pens and pencils and brushes are to be found on Steinberg's page, including the countless and multiform ways in which pens and pencils and brushes can portray pens and pencils and brushes. Until the moment comes when the pens make their entrance into picture, and the pencils and the brushes in their presence as physical objects, an absolutely modest presence, but absolutely sure of being, of being there. (...) ⁷³

[I multiformi innumerevoli modi d'usare penne e matite e pennellini s'incontrano sul foglio di Steinberg, compresi i multiformi innumerevoli modi in cui penne e matite e pennelli possono raffigurare penne e matite e pennelli. Fino al momento in cui fanno il loro ingresso nel quadro le penne, le matite, i pennelli nella loro presenza di oggetti fisici, assolutamente modesta e assolutamente sicura d'esserci, d'essere lì.] ⁷⁴

⁷³ Calvino, "The Pen in the First Person."

⁷⁴ Calvino, "La penna in prima persona (per i disegni di Saul Steinberg)," 358.

Similarly, in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* the Non-Reader character, Irnerio does not read books, but rather uses the physical book as a medium for artwork. He states:

It's not for reading. It's for making. I make things with books. I make objects. Yes, artworks: statues, pictures, whatever you want to call them. I even had a show. I fix the books with mastic, and they stay as they were. Shut, or open, or else I give them forms, I carve them, I make holes in them. A book is a good material to work with; you can make all sorts of things with it.⁷⁵

Calvino's novel explores the question of transforming conceptual text into the three-dimensional physical book.

Calvino briefly pauses in his descriptions of Steinberg designs to consider the words of Michelangelo, who claimed that there exists a single art and science -- drawing and painting-- and that every action of every person was an expression of art creativity.⁷⁶

Calvino expands Michelangelo's theory to say that the world employs man as its mechanism of art, as man creates art, exhibits art, and observes art. Calvino draws a line from Michelangelo's theories to the art of Steinberg:

(...) we are involved in playing the triple role of exhibitors, exhibits, and audience. These definitions all apply to the art of Saul Steinberg. (...) his drawing crosses the frontier between self and the world and invades space so that the draftsman finds himself caught in his drawing and the visitor to the exhibition is caught in the picture exhibited.⁷⁷

[(...) *siamo coinvolti nel triplo ruolo d'espositori, d'esposti e di pubblico. Queste definizioni valgono tutte per l'arte di Steinberg. (...) scavalca la frontiera tra sé e il mondo e invade lo spazio cosicché anche il disegnatore si trova catturato nel disegno e il visitatore dell'esposizione nel quadro esposto.*]⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, 149.

⁷⁶ Calvino, "The Pen in the First Person."

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Calvino, "La penna in prima persona (per i disegni di Saul Steinberg)," 360.

Once again, Calvino takes this interpretation and develops it into literary form. The exhibitors are converted into authors, the exhibits are converted into stories, and the audience is transformed into the character of the reader.

Calvino closes *The Pen in the First Person* by returning to the topos of the line and by reflecting on the early writings of Galileo Galilei, who articulately imagined the lines of orbit that the Earth traced around the sun, and who mused about navigable lines boats traced across the seas, and who pondered scripted lines on paper made by man. Calvino writes:

Line as the trace of movement, as delight in movement, as paradox of movement (...) The metaphysics of absolute line and the inexhaustible acrobatics of the graphic gesture: thus Galileo heralds the sidereal comet Steinberg, who traces his orbit across the sky of paper.⁷⁹

[*La linea come segno del movimento, come godimento del movimento, come paradosso del movimento. (...) La metafisica della linea assoluta e le inesauribili acrobazie del gesto grafico: così Galileo annuncia la cometa sidereal Steinberg che traccia la sua orbita attraverso il cielo di carta.*]⁸⁰

In *The Pen in the First Person*, Calvino's first essay for the drawings of Saul Steinberg, he deals rigorously with archetypal *Steinbergian* themes of line, unified multiplicity, *mise en abîme*, and conceptual art. It is no coincidence that these very themes would form the backbone of Calvino's next novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Calvino's ability to translate figurative art elements into literary narrative is also demonstrated in his second essay for the drawings of Saul Steinberg *Il crollo del tempo*.

A prefatory note to *Il crollo del tempo* states that text was written specifically for a selection of drawings that were part of a larger series to be exhibited in a Steinberg art show,

⁷⁹ Calvino, "The Pen in the First Person."

⁸⁰ Calvino, "La penna in prima persona (per i disegni di Saul Steinberg)," 360.

which never took place. When the editors of *il Caffè* published Calvino's essay, they were unable to publish those drawings alongside it. Calvino stated that in his essay he is only narrating what Steinberg drew [*"Io non faccio che raccontare quel che ha disegnato Steinberg"*];⁸¹ nonetheless the editors felt that the essay exhibited its own value and that it was worth publishing:

*Ma a noi sembra che queste pagine, pur ispirate ad alcuni motivi del grande grafico Americano, possono avere benissimo una loro validità autonoma, che cioè si illustrino da se stesse, nella loro tensione, nella loro sconvolgente rappresentazione della rovina del tempo.*⁸²

Working with the The Saul Steinberg Foundation we were able to identify three of the drawings for which the essay was written. I will focus my argument only on the text that was to accompany those drawings, since the rest of the essay continues in similar fashion.

Il crollo del tempo is divided into six narratives, each narrative corresponding to a drawing. Marco Belpoliti states that each design functions in this essay as a generative element that sparks the writer's imagination.⁸³ The first narrative seems to correspond to a drawing published in *The New Yorker* on November 4, 1967 (**Figure 21**).⁸⁴ Calvino writes:

*Non so cosa sia successo al tempo. Se sia esploso tutto d'un colpo, se si sia lentamente riempito di fessure sempre più sottili fino a sbriciolarsi, se si sia deformato contorcendosi, accartocciandosi, aggrovigliandosi su se stesso. O forse è sempre stato così, il tempo, sparpagliato senz'ordine sulla superficie accidentata dello spazio [...]*⁸⁵

I do not know what happened to time. Whether it exploded all at once, whether it slowly filled with more and more cracks, increasingly thin, until it crumbled away, whether it deformed by contorting, crumpling, tangling on itself. Or maybe it was

⁸¹ Prefatory note, "*Il crollo del tempo*," (*il Caffè* 1977: 16-22. Print.), 16.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Marco Belpoliti, *L'occhio di Calvino*, (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1996. Print.), 180.

⁸⁴ Schwartz, "Steinberg and Calvino."

⁸⁵ Calvino, "*Il crollo del tempo*", 16.

always like that, time, scattered without order on the rugged surface of space...⁸⁶

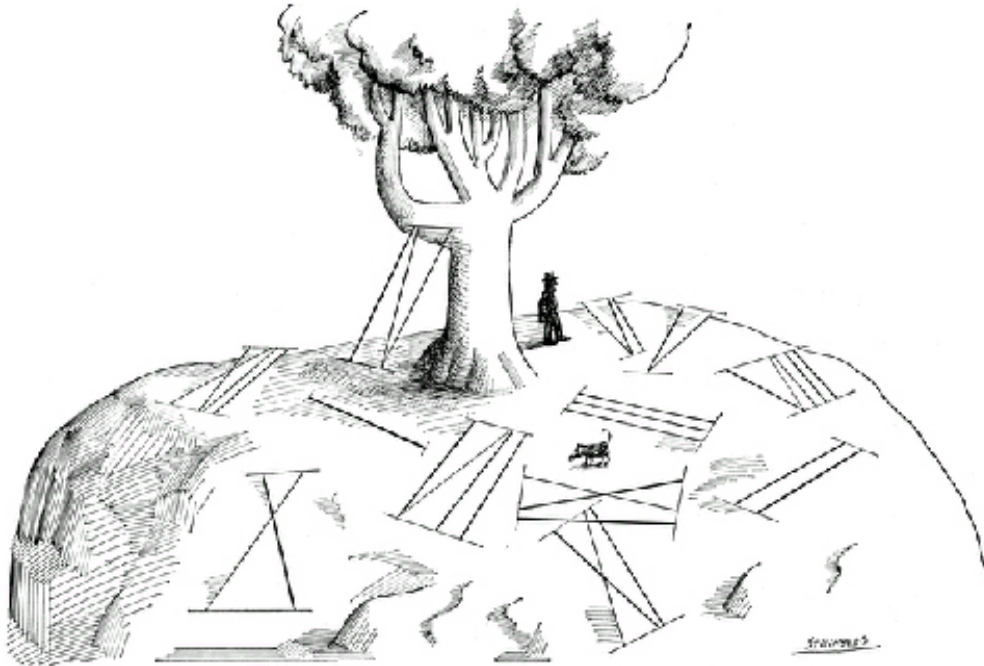


Figure 21. The New Yorker, November 4, 1967.

Calvino creates a poetic narrative around the idea that he does not know how the clock in the drawing became broken. He creates a fictional situation that hypothesizes about the past, before the observable present in which the hours and minutes of the clock are scattered about a hill. He speaks in the first person, merging fiction with reality, so that Calvino then becomes the character in Steinberg's design. Next Calvino goes on to trace in narration the scenes of the drawing:

Le ore, se è vero che erano dodici, ci sono ancora tutte, le ho contate. Sono stese per terra, sul cocuzzolo della collina, sparpagliate, sotto il grande albero. Sono rimasto un po' a osservarle ma

⁸⁶ Translation is my own.

*non sono riuscito a capire in che ordine si potrebbe metterle in ordine (...) il mio cane ci passa in mezzo indifferente, come se non ci fossero.*⁸⁷

If it is true that there were twelve hours, then they are all still there, I counted them. They are laid on the ground, on the top of the hill, scattered, underneath the big tree. I stayed for a while to observe them but I could not understand in which order one could arrange them (...) my dog walked through them indifferently, as if they were not there.⁸⁸

There are indeed twelve letters strewn around the hill under the tree, and the man in the drawing does look as if he is observing them in an effort to devise a plan to place them back in order, as his dog sniffs about nearby. After Calvino narrates what he observes, he is inspired to create a more theoretical *Calvinian* discussion regarding time:

*La mia idea è che questo sistema delle ore non abbia mai funzionato, nemmeno al tempo in cui il tempo era davvero il tempo. (...) So che una volta le ore passavano. Ma passavano dove?*⁸⁹
My idea is that this system of hours never worked, not even at the time in which time was really time. (...) I know that at one time the hours *passed*. But passed where?⁹⁰

Steinberg's drawing challenges the concept of time. What are hours but just numbers?

What is the significance of time to man, and what then is time according to his dog? What happens when time stands still? Calvino translates the visual program into poetry, combining ekphrasis with creative narrative.

For the second drawing in the essay (**Figure 22**) Calvino devised a narrative in which he and a certain "Signor S" play the roles of the two characters. In fact, if one looks closely at the image, Calvino does resemble the man in the drawing with the hat. The other is surely Steinberg.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁸ Translation is my own.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Translation is my own.

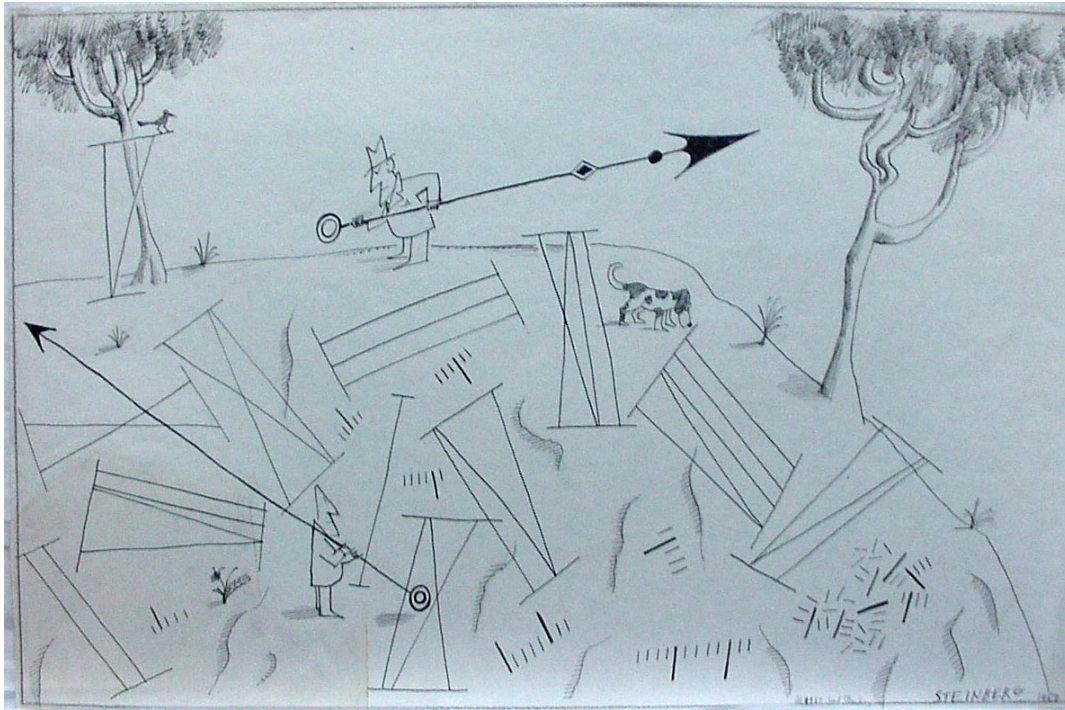


Figure 22. SSF 2000, a 1967 drawing belonging to the Saul Steinberg Foundation.

Again Calvino creates a first person narrative that traces the events that unfold in the image.

He writes:

*Oggi il Signor S. e io siamo andati sulla collina dove ci sono le ore. Abbiamo portato su quelle lance che abbiamo trovato in fondovalle: io quella più lunga e sottile, il signore S. quella un po' più corta, tutta lavorata (...)*⁹¹

Today Mr. S. and I went to the hill where the hours are. We took up the spears we found down the valley: I the long longer and thinner one, Mr. S. the shorter, more ornate one.⁹²

Calvino then expands the image, enhancing it with his own reactions and ponderings:

Ci sono molti minuti sparsi in mezzo all'erba. Sono sottili e puntuti e se non si sta attenti si rischia di conficcarsi nella pianta dei piedi e poi è difficile toglierseli, soprattutto i piccoli. Perché ce n'è di due grandezze: se ho contato bene, su cinque, quattro sono piccoli e uno è più spesso e più lungo. Ma a parte questo i minuti presentano una grande uniformità, al contrario delle ore, che

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Translation is my own.

sono una diversa dall'altra. Forse per questo ho l'impressione che i minuti si possa riuscire a metterli in ordine meglio delle ore.

There are many minutes scattered in the grass. They are thin and sharp, and if one is not careful he risks getting them stuck in the soles of his feet, and then it is difficult to remove them, especially those little ones. Because they come in two sizes: if I counted correctly, for each five, four are small and one is thicker and longer. But aside from this, the minutes are very much uniform, unlike the hours each different from the other. Perhaps this is the reason I get the impression that minutes are easier to organize than hours.⁹³

He goes beyond what is physically there to the realm of philosophy. The discussion of time becomes meditative and evocative while the image, in turn, becomes further infused with significance. The art and the text communicate in collaboration.

The passage of time is the subject in my final image from *Il crollo del tempo*, which appeared third in the essay. In 1966, Steinberg completed a number of variants on the theme of passing months and seasons, one of which appeared on the cover of *The New Yorker* (**Figure 23**).⁹⁴ In Calvino's textual translation of this image, he demonstrates his remarkable ability to paint with verbal description:

Il punto di passaggio tra Marzo e Aprile lo si trova facilmente: è un ponticello che ti si apre davanti, sulla tua strada, facile da imboccarsi, in perfetto stato di manutenzione, coi suoi parapetti sicuri. Lo si attraversa quasi senza accorgersene, a piedi o in bicicletta. [...] Se fai bene attenzione, t'accorgi che mentre la riva di Marzo era una distesa gelata, su quella d'Aprile apuntano ciuffi d'erba, forse anche qualche fiorellino e gli alberi mettono le foglie nuove, i germogli. Dall'alto del ponticello si vedono le pendici del Febbraio, in lontananza, la bianca catena montuosa che ti sei lasciato dietro le spalle. [...] È un felice viaggio, insomma; non c'è pericolo di sbagliare strada; se continui ad avanzare, la strada ti porta dritto verso l'estate. Che bellezza! Adesso, ti metterai a cantare: tra-la-la-la... No, preferisci concentrare la tua attenzione su questi segni di primavera, per convincerti che ci sono davvero. Se non fai questo piccolo sforzo, il paesaggio sembra

⁹³ Translation is my own.

⁹⁴ Schwartz, "Steinberg and Calvino."



Figure 23. *The New Yorker*, November 4, 1967.

*sempre lo stesso, una distesa piatta, pallida, monotona, un cielo popolato di nuvole che continuano a girare per conto loro, estranee, come il sole, la luna, le stelle. [...] Il solo fatto sicuro è che tu continui ad andare avanti, a pedalare sulla tua bicicletta. D'altronde non c'è scelta, non c'è che questa strada: una strada a senso unico.*⁹⁵

The point of passage between March and April is easy to find: it is a little bridge that opens appears before you, on your way, easy to get on, maintained perfectly, with safe guardrails. You cross it almost without realizing it, on foot or on a bicycle. [...] If you paid close attention, you would realize that while the bank of March was a frozen stretch, that of April displays a few tufts of grass, maybe even a few little flowers, and trees grow new leaves and sprouts. From the top of the bridge you see the peaks of February in the distance, the white mountain range that you left behind. [...] It is a happy journey, all in all, without the danger of choosing the wrong path. If you continue onward, the road takes you straight towards summer. How beautiful! Now you begin to sing *tra-la-la-la*... No, you prefer to concentrate your attention on the signs of spring, to convince yourself that they are real. Without this

⁹⁵ Calvino, "Il crollo del tempo," 19-20

little effort, the landscape always looks the same -- a flat, pale, monotone stretch with a sky populated by clouds that continue to rotate on their own behalf, outsiders, like the sun, the moon, the stars. [...] The only sure fact is that you continue to go forward pedaling your bicycle. On the other hand, there is no alternative, no other way: it is a one-way street.⁹⁶

In this case, Calvino places the reader in the role of the protagonist. He traces every the image's every detail: the path, the bridge, and the landscapes. He interacts with every line that Steinberg drew and every color that the artist chose. Belpoliti points out that this text seems to anticipate Calvino's next writing exercises on artists Peverelli, Del Pezzo, Adami, Magnelli, and Domenico Gnoli.⁹⁷

Understanding Calvino's love of the arts is an essential key to understanding Calvino's writings.⁹⁸ For Calvino, the divide between painting and poetry is nonexistent, but art and literature, instead, function in collaboration. The pen that Steinberg sets down is picked up by Calvino, who creates extraordinary ekphrastic poetry that transforms description into narration and ultimately philosophy. Calvino's art is a world in which word and image interact in true inter-textual dialogue. It was Leonardo da Vinci who wrote that painting is mute poetry and poetry is blind painting;⁹⁹ however, artist-writers Steinberg and Calvino challenge this notion, each experimenting with his own medium to push the boundary into the other realm. Theirs is a world where an image speaks on behalf of words and where literature illustrates art.

⁹⁶ Translation is my own.

⁹⁷ Belpoliti, 179.

⁹⁸ Ricci, 9.

⁹⁹ [Leonardo da Vinci. *Trattato della Pittura*. Ed. Angelo Borzelli. 1270. Carabba: n.p., 1947. N. pag. *Liber Liber*. Web. 15 May 2011.

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